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AUTHOR Shee, Soon-Chiew; Habenicht, Donna J.
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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a personal look at counseling and counselor education in Hong Kong and Singapore. A section on the availability of formal and informal training resources in counseling notes that many practitioners in the counseling profession in Hong Kong or Singapore go abroad to pursue graduate studies, since, comparatively speaking, Hong Kong and Singapore can offer no better option for graduate training in counseling than what can be obtained abroad. Opportunities for professional development in Hong Kong and Singapore do exist, however, and they include counseling courses offered by the Institute of Education and the National University of Singapore through the Department of Social Work and Psychology; the services of a variety of counseling experts obtained by the counseling associations in Singapore and Hong Kong; and the presence of a professional association, the Association of Psychological and Educational Counselors of Asia. A section on the emerging job identity of counselors looks at distinctions among counselors, social workers, and psychologists and at the attitudes of the federal government toward counselors and counseling. A section on problems presented to counselors identifies the areas of behavioral and emotional problems of children and youth, parent-child relationships, and marital problems in Hong Kong; and relationship problems, psychological problems, physical problems, material problems, and sexual problems in Singapore. The paper concludes with a summary of problems in counseling in Hong Kong and Singapore. (NB)

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COUNSELING IN HONG KONG AND SINGAPORE: PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES

Soon-Chiew Shee

Donna J. Habenicht

Andrews University

Berrien Springs, MI 49104-0100

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COUNSELING IN HONG KONG AND SINGAPORE:

PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES

The purpose of this paper is to share several facets of the condition of counseling/counselor education in these two predominantly Chinese societies as personally experienced and perceived. Suffice it to say at the outset, counseling in these places is in its toddlerhood. While we stumbled, we also experienced growth. It was both exhilarating and challenging to be part of this development.

Briefly, we would touch on the availability of formal and informal training resources in counseling, the emerging job identity of counselors, and the problems that are commonly encountered by practitioners. By way of summation, we would also leave a personal note of reflection and anticipation through observation of problem areas.

TRAINING RESOURCES

It is not far from the truth to say that America has the most accessible, well-structured, and comprehensive Master's level counseling program in the English speaking world, especially as available in M.A. level CACREP-approved programs. These usually entail two academic years of studies. Having worked the past eight years in Hong Kong and Singapore, I have seen quite a few of my friends in the counseling profession returning to England or Canada (instead of America) to pursue a one-year course in a counseling related area--MA in Guidance & Counseling or MSW with emphasis in Family Services.

The primary factor is finance. Those who can go abroad are usually sponsored and sponsoring organizations are in favor of a one-year study leave with expenses paid. Those who go on their own can not afford two years of

expenses plus loss of income. Singapore, we know of two exceptions: One sponsored by the Counseling and Care Center and another by a Christian organization. Both were for a three-year Marriage and Family Therapy degree.

Comparatively speaking, Hong Kong and Singapore have not been able to offer a better option. Though Hong Kong has a MA program in School Guidance, it is not the preferred option of most counselors. Understandably, they would prefer to expose themselves to better trained teachers and more well equipped facilities for research and supervised practical experience. Singapore does not have a university degree in Guidance & Counseling. Essentially, a few counseling courses are offered by the Institute of Education (IE Bulletin, 1988, p.86) and the National University of Singapore through the Department of Social Work and Psychology. This paper will not detail the course offerings and their implications.

For those who could not go abroad but wished to avail themselves of professional expertise, thus far, the counseling associations in Singapore and Hong Kong have obtained the services of experts such as C. H. Patterson (Rogerian and eclectic), Gerald and Marriane Corey (group and cross-cultural), Virginia Satir and colleagues (family sculpting and the setting up of the Satir Development Center), Robert Wubbolding (Reality Therapy), Florence Kislow (supervision issues and family therapy), Abe Wagner (TA) and others from England and Australia.

Professionalism is further enhanced by the presence of a professional association, the Association of Psychological and Educational Counsellors of Asia. APECA has local branches all over the region. In spite of their intentions, their resources are admittedly thin and need further development.

EMERGING JOB IDENTITY

Not unlike America, Hong Kong suffers from a fussy distinction between counselors, social workers, and psychologists. Since the time of Bradley's (1978) review of the past and present of counseling, America has made great strides in establishing a more clearly defined professional identity. Hong Kong is just beginning that tedious journey.

A survey (1980), administered to get a preliminary and general picture of the counseling situation in Hong Kong, reflected a loose definition of counseling without set boundaries. "Counseling" rendered ranged from information-giving, advising and discussion, to traditional psychotherapy. In essence, counseling activities varied in kind and in degree of sophistication.

In 1988, under the guidance of Dr. Lam Man-Ping, another survey was conducted by the Hong Kong Branch of APECA to obtain data on the roles, functions, practice and training of counselors in Hong Kong. It was intended to provide a stepping-stone to generate a more commonly accepted identity and professional boundary for counselors and to serve as a milestone in the development of the counseling profession. Though counseling is still a young field in Hong Kong, efforts are underway to facilitate its recognition by the public as a unique competency and beneficial service.

To date, no such survey or effort that we are aware of has been done in Singapore. This is not to say that the counselors are not concerned about similar issues. The scanty resources available have not yet been strategically harnessed in the promoting of public understanding and acceptance of the counseling profession.

While most of those who offer counseling in Hong Kong have "social worker" as their job title, generally, individuals in Singapore assume the

counseling role mainly in drug rehabilitation centers. A great proportion of the counsellors work for the Singapore Armed Forces. In Hong Kong, social workers very often work as school counselors. In Singapore the government has recently introduced a "pastoral care" program to cater to similar needs in high schools.

It is not uncommon to hear in both countries a sense of dissatisfaction among counselors with the overall current counseling situation. From Hong Kong's perspective, such state of discontent may be traced to the fact that at present, the Hong Kong Government has not yet recognized the post of counselor. Even those with formal counseling training would have difficulty fitting into the government and most of the postings of the voluntary agencies. Counseling is deemed by the government to be an activity performed by social workers, psychologists and other personnel such as teacher-counselors.

PROBLEMS PRESENTED TO COUNSELORS

HONGKONG

According to the survey done by APECA (1988), a great majority of counselors worked with behavioral and emotional problems of children and youth. This reflects a scenario where there are varied and intense stresses on the young population. It also serves as an indicator of the need to develop more preventive and developmental, as well as remedial, counseling services for this group.

Parent-child relationship was the second major problem that the counselors dealt with. Youth with behavioral and emotional problems usually have difficulties in relating to their parents. The emerging differences

between the generations pose a challenge for counselors.

Marital problems was another area of concern. The increasing vulnerability of families and marriages in Hong Kong is alarming. Contrary to conservative opinion, child abuse, divorce and separation ("the astronaut parent") problems are increasing in the past few years. Marital, premarital, and sex counselors are few and far between.

The dysfunctional family may be the source of most of these disturbances. However, most families do not seek assistance from counselors.

SINGAPORE

Regarding the types of problems that concern counselors in Singapore, we would like to share with you information gathered from the Samaritans of Singapore (SOS). Basically, they offer face-to-face counseling, on-site emergency services, but the bulk of what they do is through telephone counseling by maintaining a 24-hour hot-line. The five categories of problems presented as classified by SOS (1989) are: (1) Relationship, (2) psychological, (3) physical, (4) material, and (5) sexual.

Amongst the five types of problems presented, relationship problems appear to dominate. This has been the trend for the past several years. Some of the key relationship areas discussed include problems in courtship, marriage, with parents, in-laws, and colleagues. A significant minority also shared their difficulties in relating to a close relative or friend.

Loneliness, feeling inadequate about self, anxieties about career and future, and transitions in life form the main psychological problems most commonly brought up.

Material problems include difficulties in application for marriage

licenses, HDB flats, citizenship, etc. There were also those who were in despair at their job conditions and increasing debts. A small but significant number sought help for shelter from an abusive spouse, a violent boy/girl-friend, or a threatening parent.

Males usually expressed more anxieties regarding sexual problems. Many showed a lack of knowledge in sexual matters, but were generally afraid to discuss their questions with families or friends.

A notable number expressed difficulties coping with failing health, either because of illness or disability. This has been the concern primarily of older counselees. Anxieties about physical appearances is common among the teenagers.

PROBLEMS

As we look at the present and future of the counseling profession in Hong Kong and Singapore, a number of problems are evident:

1. A preponderance of female counselors.
2. A relatively young working force.
3. Lack of counseling skill training (supervised practicum) in practitioners who are trained social workers.
4. Lack of cohesive control or discipline on the quality of service and professional conduct.
5. Inadequate respect and awareness by the public for counseling services.
6. Lack of a knowledge base through research on cross-cultural concerns, the application of western techniques to eastern settings, or the development of indigenous theories and techniques of counseling.

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